



March 10, 2009 – Excellent Teaching

Listening Sessions with DC Teachers

Over the past month I have been meeting with groups of our teachers and other school staff to hear more about their experiences in our schools. I have been impressed to see that even after a long day in school, over the course of a month, over 200 teachers, counselors, librarians, and related service providers came downtown to talk with me about their ideas, challenges and concerns, and triumphs in their work. They also asked a lot of questions, and I have been reflecting on their questions this month.

Questions from Teachers About What We Expect

Many teachers have asked what I think great teaching looks like. Some are concerned about sterilizing their teaching into a “one-size fits all” style.

There are some teachers who, with very little support from large bureaucratic systems that are broken in many places, have reached academic heights with their students that leave the rest of us shaking our heads in amazement. They do not let one student stray from their sights and expectations for achievement, and they bring enormous reserves of energy, patience and determination to their work. Their students come back years later, remembering the teacher’s lessons that came back to them at critical moments in their lives, or recalling earlier statements that they needed to bravely and positively move forward. Some speak of this teaching almost as something mythical.

But it is not myth, and it takes hard work to get there. It is excellent teaching, and I have seen it in our schools.

I understand that not all teachers start out this way. Yes, we want our teachers to have results with students, as we should all be accountable for the job we are

paid to do. But just because a hard working teacher is not seeing the results he or she wants to see right now, this does not mean he or she won't get there.

Teaching is a craft, and with the right supports, we want to work with teachers to develop that craft. New teachers need guidance and support that often looks different from the kind of support that veteran teachers want. We want to differentiate support to the needs of teachers, no matter where they are in their careers.

Teachers also should have the data that tells them how well their students are doing, and the professional development necessary to interpret and use that data to help them succeed. Finally, when teachers are hitting the milestones that show they are excellent or moving toward it, they should be rewarded as we reward those in almost every other profession and career.

Excellent Teaching: Does it all look the same?

A teacher asked me last week if our focus on data, and our use of objective measures of students' academic growth, means that we want to standardize teaching to one teaching style. Absolutely not. Such a practice would be a disservice to children and it would be a surefire way to strip the joy from teaching and lower student achievement levels.

Excellent teachers do have things in common, some best practices that help teachers to advance student achievement in their classrooms. For example, excellent teachers clearly and consistently communicate high expectations to their students, and they are very clear about what students can do to meet and exceed these expectations.

The excellent teachers I have met believe that all of their children can learn, and they make it clear to students that the greatest factor in their success will be how hard they work, not "how smart they are." Excellent teachers know how to manage their classrooms well, and they are consistent in sticking to the guidelines (often created with students) that promote learning. They respect their students and it shows. They are relentless in their pursuit of excellence, and they have the skills in their subject areas and multiple successful teaching strategies to hold all their students to high standards for excellence.

This does not mean that all excellent teaching looks the same. Excellent teaching comes in as many styles as there are student needs, and it is truly inspiring to see the different ways that different excellent teaching styles can all resonate with students and challenge them toward success.

For example, we have a veteran teacher at one school who teaches 8th grade boys, and she is strict! Every student walking into her classroom knows he is there to learn, and that she is the one in charge of guiding them toward that

result. On the day we saw her teaching, every child was not only listening to her with rapt attention, but every child was actively engaged, responding excitedly to her rapid fire questions that challenged them to respond with high energy in a lesson on fact vs. opinion. Throughout the lesson, they clearly knew what to expect from her, and the routines she had established clearly had taken much time and practice to develop.

Watching another teacher, “strict” and “discipline” were not the first words that came to mind. This teacher communicated the same high expectations as the first teacher did, but in a very different way. His voice did not boom as hers did, and it didn’t need to. His questions were challenging, but he smiled more, facilitated, mediated, was patient as he encouraged students to think before they spoke, and respected the silence it took to do so. Their responses showed the thoughtfulness and critical thinking he encouraged.

Based on what students produced in both classes, it was clear that both of these teachers had approaches that yielded results in student learning and motivation.

More Teacher Meetings

Thank you to the teachers, counselors, librarians, service providers, WTU representatives and other school staff who came downtown to talk with me about teaching this month. I am grateful for the input, ideas, questions, feedback and the experiences you shared. We will be scheduling more of these meetings in March and April and will post them on www.k12.dc.us.

As we create a system that better supports teachers to master the craft of teaching, I look forward to seeing the results that they create. We all know how hard the work is and will continue to be, but I have no doubt that we can achieve our goals for excellence in Washington, DC.

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